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ON PAGE A4

THE WASHINGTON STAR (GREEN LINE)
5 January 1979

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Panel Studying U.S. Ability to Verify SALT

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The Senate Intelligence Committee is scrutinizing U.S. ability to verify Soviet compliance with a strategic arms limitation treaty.

Verification has already become a controversial issue even though a SALT II treaty has yet to emerge from protracted U.S.-Soviet negotiations.

Some administration officials concerned with SALT are hopeful that a favorable report from the committee, supported by conservatives such as Barry Goldwater, who is its vice chairman, would go a long way toward defusing verification as a contentious issue.

The committee, which has been closely following the SALT negotiations, is unlikely to release any of its findings until after a treaty is signed, according to a spokesperson.

THE PRIMARY MEANS of verification by the United States are satellite cameras and electronic eavesdropping

on Soviet missile activity. Much of the recent controversy over verification has centered on a recently expanded Soviet practice of putting into code information radioed to ground stations during missile tests.

At a negotiating session last month in Geneva, the Soviet Union reportedly agreed not to encode information important to such SALT items as the number of warheads carried by a missile.

That has done little to satisfy SALT critics.

A conservative group which includes members of Congress, the Coalition of Peace Through Strength, kept up its criticism, zeroing in on verification at a panel discussion yesterday.

Daniel O. Graham, the retired general who headed the Defense Intelligence Agency, said the Soviets could hide information from their missile tests without encoding the radio signals. The compromise reached in Geneva was a case of the administration "trying to soften the

charge of pushing an unverifiable treaty," he said.

GRAHAM CALLED the Soviet offer to use code only on matters unimportant to SALT a "preposterous dodge."

Dr. Ray Cline, a former State Department intelligence official and onetime deputy director of the CIA, accused the administration of abandoning objective, stringent standards for verification.

Cline said the State Department is saying all that is required by SALT II is "an adequate" level of monitoring in order to guard against violations that would "significantly" alter the U.S.-Soviet strategic balance.

In doing so, he continued, the administration has turned the question of Soviet treaty compliance into a political one. Cline added that he felt some aspects of the emerging SALT II treaty would require on-site inspection for adequate verification. That is something the Soviet Union has always rejected.